

Hawksbills could beat extinction February 8, 2006

By Jan TenBruggencate <<mailto:jant@honoluluadvertiser.com>>

Advertiser Science Writer

This baby hawksbill, found Jan. 7 at an undisclosed O'ahu beach, was brought to Sea Life Park.

Sea Life Park photo

This baby hawksbill captured on the North Shore was brought to Sea Life Park, where it was inspected by a park veterinarian and released back into the wild. The turtle was estimated to be no more than two days old, indicating it had hatched on the island. Sea Life Park staff urges people to leave the sea turtles alone.

Sea Life Park

The endangered hawksbill turtle, which had been hunted to near extinction for its attractive shell, appears to be making the beginnings of a comeback on O'ahu.

Scientists say they have evidence of at least four separate hawksbill turtle nestings on O'ahu beaches in the past year -- three last summer and the most recent within the first week of the new year.

A woman who watched a tiny turtle being washed around in the surf Jan. 7 at an undisclosed North Shore beach captured it and brought it to Sea Life Park -- apparently thinking it was in need of help. It wasn't.

The keiki turtle was inspected by park veterinarian Dr. Bethany Doescher, who found there was nothing wrong with the animal. Park officials waited until after dark so predators would be less likely to attack, and released it from Makapu'u, said Jeff Pawloski, zoologist and research and education coordinator at the park.

National Marine Fisheries Service biologist George Balazs, who studied photographs of the baby turtle sitting on the hand of Sea Life Park senior aquarist Danielle Swenson, said it was probably no more than two days old, indicating it had hatched on O'ahu. If they are not clearly in need of help, hatchlings should be left alone, he said.

Balazs said that newly hatched hawksbills were found on Kailua beach on three separate occasions last summer, far enough apart to indicate they

came from three separate nests. It would be the first time the rare hawksbill turtle has been known to nest on O'ahu since the 1970s, he said.

"Clearly, somewhere along Kailua Beach or Lanikai, there were nests. It could be the same female in each of those cases, since they are known to lay multiple nests," Balazs said.

"This is really good news."

All three of the summer hatchlings died. Two were found dead, and the third had a large wound that may have been caused by a crab, Balazs said. But others may have made it to the deep ocean.

A single hawksbill can have 100 or more eggs in a nest, and may nest four to five times a season.

The largest hawksbill turtles grow to 3 feet in length and can weigh as much as 300 pounds, although most adults are considerably smaller. They nest in small numbers on the Kihei coast of Maui and on the Big Island.

One of the most important nesting sites is Kamehame Beach on the southeastern side of the Big Island, where the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service operate a volunteer monitoring program.

Also, Balazs said residents found a turtle nest in their beachfront yard at Kailua last summer. At first, wildlife officials wondered if they'd found a hawksbill nest, but the hatchlings were green sea turtles -- a threatened species. It was the first recorded green sea turtle nesting on Kailua Beach. Most green sea turtles swim to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to nest.

Balazs said he hesitates to express too much excitement about the O'ahu turtle recovery but admits to believing there is "a slow, gradual but upward nesting trend in the main Hawaiian Islands."

/Reach Jan TenBruggencate at jant@honoluluadvertiser.com
<<mailto:jant@honoluluadvertiser.com>>./